

Social Psychology

Social Cognition: Attribution Process

Your friend gives you a present and says goodbye. A man and a woman are arguing in the street. Someone drives by going too fast, tyres squealing. In the park nearby some children are playing with a ball, a woman is feeding the ducks and a man sits alone on a park bench laughing quietly.

Why are they doing these things? If we are just a little curious we might want to explain their behaviours. In trying to do this, we assume there is a cause behind each piece of behaviour. The attribution process is concerned to *understand and explain how people attribute causes to their own and other people's behaviour* (Pennington 1986 p127). As we don't have direct access to other people's subjective reasoning, we guess their underlying motives through observing their behaviours. Perhaps the driver is hurrying to hospital or escaping from police. It seems plausible that we might occasionally look at our own behaviour too in the same way to explain what's happened. Imagine you've just been for an interview and it went dreadfully. You might say to yourself that it was because you were nervous or distracted by the gorgeousness of the interviewer. Whenever we try to explain a piece of behaviour, we are engaging in the attribution process.

An important initial distinction is whether the behaviour was intentional or not and, secondarily if it was intentional, was it due to the person or their situation? So there are three possible kinds of cause:

physical cause (non-intentional)	behaviour is due to mechanisms in the physical environment (including mechanisms in the body)	trip up because there's a hole in the carpet, shouting because their drunk
mental cause #1 (intentional)	behaviour is due to social pressures and norms that operate within the social environment	sitting down in a classroom, giving a Christmas card to someone just because they've given one to you
mental cause #2 (intentional)	behaviour is due to an underlying personal characteristic or disposition	playing cards because you like it, smiling because you're happy, giving a Christmas card to someone because you like them

A distinction is made here between a purely physicalist account of behaviour and a mentalistic account. In the former case, although we would want to say that the behaviour was certainly caused, we would not want to hold the person responsible since they did not choose to behave in that way. However, in the latter cases we would hold them responsible. This distinction points to a distinction between

behaviour on the one hand and *action* on the other. Whereas all movements might be called behaviours, only those where the person's intentions play a role are actions. Furthermore, if choice is part of the explanation, we say that the person has a **reason** for acting, where a reason is a combination of beliefs and desires. (Watson 1975). We might define attribution theory a little more specifically than Pennington and say that in social psychology it is concerned with *finding reasons for actions*, bearing in mind our careful definitions of these terms.

Heider (1944) has provided the basis for attribution theory, focusing on the social environment. He suggested that:

- a) people perceive behaviour as being cause
- b) it is important to understand people's perceptions
- c) the locus of the causes of behaviour is perceived to be with the person, with the situation or a combination of the two.

Believing that there are causes (or reasons) for a behaviour (or action) helps us to reduce the uncertainty of the world and to assign responsibility. He also claimed that our perceptions of behaviour (or action) depend upon the characteristics of the perceiver as well as the characteristics of what is being perceived and the context in which the perception is taking place. Some people will see the man laughing on the park bench as sad, some as happy and free, some as a sign of madness, even though the behaviour and context remains constant.

The locus of the cause can have significant implications for how we deal with people. Suppose the woman who was arguing with the man in the street suddenly, deliberately and fatally pushes him into the path of the speeding car. If you were a juror how would you decide who was responsible and for what? Was it murder, manslaughter or a road traffic accident? For her to be convicted of murder you would need to be able to attribute the cause entirely to the person, to make a personal attribution, sometimes called a dispositional or internal attribution. In contrast, to convict her of manslaughter a situational or external attribution would have to be made, such that most people in her situation would have acted the same way. An example might be if he was the kidnapper of her child and was threatening to harm the child or if he was attacking her. To say that it was a road traffic accident we would have to be sure that there was no intention on behalf of the woman to kill the man (i.e. just an unlucky physical circumstance).

Theories of Attribution

Causal schemata model (Kelley 1972)

We often make attributions of cause even when we have no more than one observation of a person's behaviour. We use our knowledge (hence *schemata*) to tell us how people normally behave and make a judgement based on this. For example, you might prefer to say that the woman feeding ducks in the park was out for a relaxing walk, rather than she was trying to get rid of some top secret files snatched from the CIA. A

causal schemata then is 'a general conception .. about how certain kinds of cause interact to produce certain kinds of effect' (Kelley 1972). We arrive at the particular attribution using the *discounting principle* according to Kelley, where we discount other possible causes if we believe one is particularly likely. If a police car is right behind the speeding car then we might discount the rushing-to-hospital cause, though we could be wrong. If it's Christmas and our friend gives us a present we think nothing more of it, though we could be wrong again. This discounting principle points us to the idea that we opt for the simplest explanation among competing explanations (law of parsimony). Of course several causes could be operating at once, but we are likely to choose a simpler version. Perhaps the speeding car is trying to get away from the police car because the driver needs to get a critically ill person to hospital and has no time to spare. Perhaps your friend is leaving the country forever and has not told you, it being mere coincidence that it's Christmas. The tendency towards simplicity means that we may be tempted to attribute only one of many causes that are in fact operating.

The covariation model

When we have information about both how people generally act **and** about how this particular person has acted in the past, we use three types of information to balance our attributions in terms of their dispositional/internal/personal content and their situational/external/normative content, according to Kelley's (1967) covariation model. It is called the covariation model because it relies on the notion that effects change or co-vary when causes change. A change in action is assumed to be due to a covarying change in the cause. Imagine a fictional student called Zac is late for a particular psychology lesson. Is he a late person (dispositional attribution) or is he just following the norms (situational attribution)?

Type of information	Questions asked about behaviour	Examples
Consistency	Does the person act in the same way to the same stimulus at different times? Is the action stable over time and location?	<i>Zac is late for psychology every lesson (high consistency = dispositional attribution)</i>
Consensus	Do other people act in the same way in response to the same stimulus?	<i>Zac is late even though no-one else is. (Low consensus = dispositional attribution)</i>
Distinctiveness	Does the person act similarly in other similar situations?	<i>Zac's lateness is not distinctive of psychology classes (low distinctiveness = dispositional attribution)</i>

In contrast, an external or situational attribution (it's worth being late for psychology) would be made if Zac were always late (high consistency), he is late only for psychology (low distinctiveness) and everyone else was late too (high consensus). Other combinations are possible. For example, with low consistency (Zac has never been late for a psychology lesson before), high consensus (everyone is late) and high distinctiveness (Zac is late only for this particular lesson although he's in College for other lessons), the disgruntled psychology teacher would not make a normative attribution since Zac has not been late for psychology lessons before, nor a dispositional attribution because everyone is late. Instead the teacher might look for a combination of circumstantial causes. Maybe Zac has just found his winning lottery ticket and is treating everyone in his class, apart from his teacher, or the bus has broken down.

McArthur (1972) found that people tend to make more internal attributions than external. He also found that in order to make attributions people rely most on information about how *distinctive* the action was to the situation, then on *consistency* to the situation, then on the extent of *consensus* in response to this situation. Garland et al (1975) found that when people were allowed to ask for information only 23% of requests were for consistency, distinctiveness or consensus information but 29% for other dispositional information such as personality and 25% for information about other people involved. These figures suggest that the covariation model misleadingly implies that people use only three types of information, namely consistency, distinctiveness and consensus (Pennington 1986 p 132 - 133).

Correspondent inference theory

Jones and Davis (1965) devised this theory in an attempt to detail how we make internal/dispositional attributions. The assumption is that when we infer or judge that an action corresponds to an underlying enduring personality characteristic, then we make an internal/dispositional attribution. In order to make such an attribution, we take into account two factors, namely an *analysis of uncommon effects* and an analysis of the *social desirability* of the action. The analysis of uncommon effects involves comparing the outcome of a chosen action with the potential outcomes of unchosen actions. The more similar the outcomes of the chosen and the unchosen actions, the more likely we are to make an internal/dispositional attribution. For example, you go to buy a CD and are faced with three choices. Imagine they are all by the same band (common factor) but one is cheaper than the other two (uncommon factor). From comparing your chosen action (buying the cheaper CD) with its unchosen alternative (buying either of the others), we can attribute a personality characteristic as being the cause (your economic prudence). If, however, it's just trendy to have that particular CD (social desirability) then we should be reluctant to make an internal/dispositional attribution, other than that you want to be trendy. If you choose an untrendy, expensive CD it would be reasonable to make such an attribution.